

Prototyping the Smith Collection and Deep South DH -- Sharing the stories of the South and broadening access to the digital humanities

Program Description and Goals

Contemporary students and scholars of the humanities have most likely heard of or maybe experimented with digital humanities (DH). The potential of sharing, engaging, and pushing the boundaries of humanities inquiry through DH is exciting and growing, but it's also shaped through building skills and community, which Mississippi does not currently have. We propose a public panel and brief public workshop (phase I) as a pre-cursor to building that community through a recurring, public institute called Deep South DH (phase II), which will provide a series of skill-building workshops for teaching those interested in humanities-based digital inquiry technical competencies, and provide a community of practice for sharing opportunities and troubleshooting. Prior to Deep South DH, we would prototype the sandbox for the institute, which would include a large digital collection of historical letters housed in the MUW archive, and build interest through a public panel about the project and the beginnings of its digitization process.

The Ellard-Murphree-Pilgreen-Smith Collection ("Smith Papers") is an archival collection of more than 6,000 letters from family members in and from Pittsboro, Mississippi between 1909-1975. These letters discuss daily, rural life in the 20th century, chronicling the quotidian details of a homesteading, agrarian life, alongside the greater events of the Great Depression, World War II, the 1960s Civil Rights movement, and second-wave feminism. These letters tell a story of rural life in context of national change, and in addition to offering a robust picture of Mississippi Women's lives and histories, they are a teaching tool for students. MUW Fant Memorial Library faculty and staff have begun digitizing these letters and preparing them for digital engagement for students in the newly established Digital Studies Minor at MUW. In "Intro to Digital Studies" (LIB 201), students are learning what it takes to prepare a print-based, textual letter for digital consumption. They are creating metadata, learning about the collection, researching topics, and creating digital artifacts like transcripts, maps, timelines, text analyses, and exhibits.

The stories in the letters, the artifacts resulting in their digitization, and the documentation chronicling that process have the potential to serve as both a vibrant retelling of southern life and culture, and as a model for other collections that haven't benefitted from the time and resources of digital prep work. In addition to adding to the narrative of southern and rural culture through a glimpse into the inner lives of educated, well-travelled women and their family members during momentous occasions in 20th century history, the Smith Collection project can serve as a prototype for similar collections. The Smith Collection can be a teaching tool for MUW students and an engaging collection for the public, but it can also show researchers, scholars, museum and library staff, and anyone working with a collection of materials how to leverage the power of free, open-access digital tools and online spaces to initiate more engagement with their items.

Phase I

In the early spring of 2022, we would like to hold a virtual panel on the significance of letters in the history of women's lives, followed by a brief workshop on preparing items for digitization. The panel would host scholars that have worked with letters to and from southern women. We have not

identified all of the experts who would be guest speakers for this panel, but we are in ongoing conversations with faculty and staff at other institutions. Dr. Bridget Pieschel, MUW professor emerita and donator of the Smith Papers collection, and author of two historical volumes of MUW and its alumnae, as agreed to be on the panel. Dr. Suzanne Marrs, author of two volumes of Eudora Welty's letters (in addition to other biographical works), has also agreed to be a panelist. The panel would set the stage for explaining the historical and research significance of the Smith Papers collection and the reason for the website, and it would segue into a workshop on the technical and practical needs for digitizing any collection of papers, letters or otherwise. This brief workshop would also prime attendees for interest in the institute. We would co-host the workshop with Mona Vance, the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library Archivist, and would be housed in the Mims Digitization and Preservation Lab at MUW Library.

The goals of the panel would be to:

- Host a panel of scholars to discuss the importance of letters from "ordinary" people in the larger context of 20th century American women
- Debut the Smith Papers project as a tool to engage with research on Mississippi women's lives through their letters
- Provide participants with a roadmap for digitizing a collection, and build interest in a DH community

Phase II

To broaden participation in humanities engagement and teach these digital lessons, we will propose a 3-day workshop in the late summer, Deep South Digital Humanities, where participants can learn, as we have done in working with the Smith Collection, how to organize, manage, and prepare their own work to share in a digital environment.

The Deep South Digital Humanities Institute would teach participants how to digitize, share, and apply digital humanities methodologies to their collections and stories in order to enrich the public experience of Mississippi and rural, Southern history and culture. In this institute, project coordinators would draw on the expertise of digital humanities scholars and practitioners (in addition to their own experiences) to teach participants how to turn their hidden collections into digitally accessible corpora. We have not identified the experts who would be guest speakers for the institute, but we are in ongoing conversations with digital humanities faculty and staff at other institutions, namely the creators of [Collection Builder](#) at University of Idaho, Nickoal Eichmann-Kalwara at the University of Colorado, Boulder, and regional DH scholars at the University of Alabama. We continue to discuss this project with experts in digital archiving, text analysis methods, and website generation.

The goals of the Institute would be to provide participants with:

- An understanding of the digitization process – or what it takes to transform print or analog materials into a publicly accessible and organized collection
- How to prepare these materials in accessible ways for the public, and what digital tools help with that

- What digital humanities methodologies can be applied to these materials (e.g. textual analysis, digital narrative or exhibits, mapping, etc.) to allow for further public engagement with these collections

Through this institute we hope to build an ongoing community for those participating in the digital humanities in the south. Because there is no other center for supporting this work in Mississippi (there is a center for digital humanities at the University of Alabama), this would fill a gap in the support that working with digital objects necessitates, and it would be a resource for people to share their opportunities and develop and tap into the power of cross-institutional collaborations.

In order to prepare for this institute and build public engagement with the Smith Papers Collection, we are proposing to fund someone with technical experience (in digital humanities or a computer-related job) to further the work the project coordinators have accomplished thus far – digitizing letters and preparing them for digital consumption – by building on the existing collection, and prototyping this project through Collection Builder for sustainable and accessible digital interaction with collections. The results of this prototype and its documentation would serve as the model for others with little resources for building elaborate websites and maintaining their infrastructures. We believe it is important to conduct this proof of concept in order to document the processes and identify any issues with the technology before hosting the Institute.

Marketing Plan

Our marketing plan for the panel will include social media, print flyers, and direct emails to interested individuals. We will use this to also raise awareness of the Deep South Digital Humanities Institute and build relationships across the state among institutions and individuals who are trying to establish community in the preservation and technical support of their work. At a 2020 Digitarium conference hosted by University of Alabama, a panel called “DH in the South,” panel members, along with several in the audience, lamented that there was not a centralized, regular line of communication among Southern “DH-ers.” Additionally, conferences like Digitarium offer annual meetings and presentations, and while these are excellent showcases of ongoing work, they do not offer skills-training or ongoing support. This is even more so the case in Mississippi, which has no DH center, as the University of Alabama does.

We will directly contact institutions of higher learning in Mississippi, community colleges, libraries, museums, and historical societies in Mississippi via individual and listserv emails, and word of mouth alongside indirect channels such as social and print media (flyers, brochures, posters, etc.) that can be shared across multiple platforms. We will also contact conference organizers (like those at University of Alabama) that host digital humanities sessions.

Evaluation

Indirect

The impact of the social media posts advertising the panel will be measured using a quantitative method with Facebook’s Creator Studio Insights. Insights only gathers post performance metrics for Facebook and Instagram. Twitter Analytics will be used to assess the impact of tweets sent from Fant Library’s Twitter account. We will track the number of physical/print media that are produced as well as their distribution location (when possible) which may include but is not limited to local places of business like the Columbus Arts Council and Coffeehouse on Fifth. This data will be collected in Excel spreadsheets. Once the website is live and shared, we will also track analytics for engagement

with the site, and we will include a place for people to share their contact information for updates about Deep South DH.

Direct

Following the panel, we will collect email addresses of participants with continued interest, and we will use both the Mississippi Humanities Council evaluations in combination with an evaluation that asks what kinds of skills participants would be interested in building or developing.

Previous experience with similar programs and MHC

Hillary Richardson, one of the project's coordinators, is MUW's Coordinator for Undergraduate Research and a faculty member in MUW's Digital Studies program. Teaching Introduction to Digital Research, she has worked with students and fellow library faculty, including Elaine Walker, the Graduate Studies Librarian, to begin the digitization of this project and interrogate the artifacts created using digital humanities tools.

Hillary has been working on digital public history projects since 2015, with the creation of "A Shaky Truce: Starkville Civil Rights, 1960-1980" (starkvillecivilrights.msstate.edu). Through help from a MS Humanities Council mini-grant in 2016, this project collected archival materials, oral histories, and debuted the online project through a moving community forum on the history of Civil Rights in Starkville. Hillary is currently collaborating with an external colleague to migrate this project from a WordPress platform to GitHub through Collection Builder.

Hillary and Elaine were selected to participate in the Digital Humanities Research Institute through an NEH grant with CUNY in June 2021. Through hands-on workshops and self-guided learning, participants learned core technical competencies and foundational digital humanities tools to work with digital collections, deepening their expertise and commitment to create the Deep South Digital Humanities Institute. Elaine and Hillary are using their skills to prepare, build, and share the Smith Collection project. Using this collection as a sandbox for the Deep South DH Institute, this program would demonstrate how digital collections of primary sources can serve as a window into the complexity of southern lives, a learning tool for digital competencies, and a nexus for support and community.

Benefits of the project

The workshops would teach people skills that they could use to digitize and share their collections, but it would also allow them to share their skills with people in their institutions/communities.

The workshop would also create a cohort of participants that could serve as the seed of a community for working with digital tools and collections, which is critical to the sustainability and success of projects like this. The community would also fill a need for people in Mississippi and surrounding areas that don't have access to a Digital Scholarship Center, like many universities do in other states (e.g. Alabama, Georgia, etc.), and it wouldn't be exclusive to members of the university community, either. Having a community to troubleshoot issues with technologies is key for sustaining a digital collection, but this group would also be a place to share opportunities, resources, and collaborations.

Finally, this project would eventually result in the creation of digital collections about Southern life and culture. These collections would be digitally available to a public audience, and would showcase the rich stories of the deep south and the often overlooked complexities of rural life.

Schedule of Events

September – December 2021:

- Continue to digitize and prepare the Smith Papers collection. Develop documentation to accompany the creation of the Smith Papers website via Collection Builder.
- Contact experts to serve as Deep South DH Institute workshop leaders
- Hire a part-time individual to help digitize and prepare the github website for the Smith Papers collection.
- Solidify experts in Mississippi women's writing and history for the spring 2022 panel
- Begin sharing and marketing the site and the panel event

January 2022:

- Market the panel

January/February 2022:

- Host the panel on digitizing women's lives through letters
- Continue to build interest and consensus
- Solidify experts in digital humanities scholarship and practitioners to serve as leaders in the Deep South DH Institute

March – June 2022:

- Market the institute and solicit participants to attend
- Solidify the workshop schedule

Late July/early August 2022: host Deep South DH Institute